

a complex statistical analysis of evidence from 93 countries between 1981 and 1995, and is illustrated by the experiences of Uganda and Mexico during those years.

In Mexico in the 1990s, the news media became “increasingly independent and critical of the government,” exposing massacres of peasants and other atrocities committed by the incumbent regime. Did reform follow? Quite the opposite. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, as the Mexican press became more dogged in its reporting, journalism became a more dangerous occupation. Over time, however, persistent coverage of government scandals helped strip the regime of its legitimacy, and in 2000 the Institutional Revolutionary Party lost the presidency after more than 70 years of single-party rule. But in Uganda, a feisty press continues without success. Reporters there run roughshod over President Yoweri Museveni’s attempts to tamp down their reports of massive human rights violations, but he remains at the helm, as he has since 1986.

PRESS & MEDIA

Signal Effects

THE SOURCE: “Do Television and Radio Destroy Social Capital? Evidence From Indonesian Villages” by Benjamin A. Olken, in *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, Oct. 2009.

IT IS A COMMON CHARGE THAT excessive television viewing drives down rates of civic and social involvement. A recent

study by Benjamin A. Olken, an economist at MIT, shows just how true that is, measuring how much people’s community participation decreases for every channel they receive.

Indonesia boasts a strong tradition of community involvement. A typical village has a broad range of civic activities, including religious study groups, women’s organizations, savings and credit partnerships, and neighborhood associations. In Olken’s study of 600 villages in east and central Java—one of the most densely populated places on earth—the average community had nearly

In Indonesia, when a new TV station became available, villagers’ community participation was reduced by 11 percent.

180 different groups. But that number dropped precipitously in areas with better television and radio reception. With just one more TV station available than average, the number of community organizations dropped by about 12.

There are 11 major stations broadcasting throughout Indonesia (up from just one, the government-owned TVRI, in 1993), but the average household in Olken’s study received only five. The Indonesians in his survey spent 123 minutes watching TV and 60 minutes listening to the radio each day. When a sixth channel was available, household viewing

increased by 14 minutes a day and attendance at meetings fell by 11 percent.

Over a three-month period, the extra time in front of the tube correlated with participation in four percent fewer social activities.

The decline in participation was more pronounced among organizations dedicated to improving local infrastructure, school committees, neighborhood associations, and savings and credit partnerships. Religious groups, which made up about one-fifth of the groups but drew about 40 percent of the attendance of all groups combined, didn’t see their numbers drop quite as steeply as the secular groups. Richer respondents with more TV channels reduced their participation in social groups more than other demographics.

Interestingly, the decline in the quantity of civic participation was not matched by a decline in the quality of the civics. Some of the meetings Olken examined were related to a massive road-building project financed by the World Bank. Although attendance was lower in areas with greater TV reception, just as many people were likely to speak, and they discussed the same number of problems. Of course, Olken points out, these small meetings about local roads didn’t receive much media attention. But for higher levels of government, increased TV reception means more time in the public eye—which might have a greater impact than additional meeting attendees.